



# Spatial Economics Research Centre

Friday, 30 September 2011

## Planning for People

The National Trust have outlined their [alternative vision for the planning system](#). As a reminder, at the heart of the government's reform proposal lies the idea of the local plan (drawn up subject to incentives via New Homes Bonus etc) and a 'presumption in favour of development' providing it is consistent with the plan. No up-to-date plan? Then the presumption in favour of development takes over.

The National Trust suggests several adjustments. First, local communities should be able to have more say in drawing up local plans and specifically to reduce the amount of development that is planned locally. This suggestion causes problems for the government precisely because the proposed reforms do appear asymmetric on the extent to which neighbourhoods have power to affect local development. Specifically, they can decide to allow more development, but not less. If the government had confidence in the power of its financial incentives to affect local community attitudes to development, this restriction would be unnecessary. The problem is, of course, that the incentives are at the local authority, not the local level, [we don't know whether they will be large enough](#) and, regardless, it's hard to see exactly how the financial benefits to allowing development will filter down to local neighbourhoods affected. In short, there is a potential conflict between the principle of localism and what the government wants to achieve.

I have less sympathy with the other proposals in the NT manifesto. For example, if the lack of a local plan removes the need to say yes to development then how does NT suggest that we make sure that LAs have up-to-date local plans? With no local plan in place, we are back to decision-by-decision planning which is worse than the system we currently have (which most people, including the NT, agree doesn't work).

Much more seriously, is the presumption in favour of 'brownfield land first' that NT want imposed. Again, this would maintain the status quo, so it might be useful to remind ourselves of the fundamental problem here: we need more housing. There are alternatives to trying to achieve this by building more homes on greenfield land. For example, let's all agree it would be good to make more use of long term vacant properties (especially if neglected). Let's agree to disagree on second homes. But let's acknowledge that even if we tackled both these issues it wouldn't do much to [tackle the overall problem \(even if we knew how\)](#). Debates around the sale of council homes are another red herring because those homes still constitute part of the supply. There is, of course, a debate to be had about how much [new housing the government \(or local councils\) should directly provide](#). However, I haven't seen any serious suggestions as to how a large government home building programme would be funded if it was necessary.

And all of these alternatives still leave open the question of where these homes would be built. By opposing reforms because of the impact on the environment, NT are continuing to champion brownfield land policies. But these policies [haven't delivered the kind of homes people want, in the place they want them, in the kind of numbers needed](#). The same profound problem applies to commercial land. In short, the problem with the NT manifesto is that they provide no concrete proposals for dealing with the fundamental problem that the government's reforms are trying to address!

Posted by [Prof Henry G. Overman](#) on [Friday, September 30, 2011](#)

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